

Name _____

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail
By Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee

Act I

(Pages 1-9)

1. The very first words you read in this play are stage directions – information given to the director and actors as to where things should be and how certain actions should take place. Choose two of the directions on page three and explain what the playwrights are trying to accomplish with each.
2. Who are the first characters the audience meets? What is their relationship to Henry David Thoreau?
3. The next characters the audience meets are two of Thoreau's relatives. How do the playwrights characterize each?
4. Describe Henry as you first meet him. Include the setting of the play as well as the reason he is there.
5. There is quite a bit of wordplay going on in the first few pages about Henry's identity and actions. What are some of the jests here?
6. How do the first several pages of the play foreshadow upcoming events and themes?
7. By page nine, the reader has to get used to lots of different things going on seemingly at the same time. How do the playwrights give the reader (or the audience) background information while the main action continues? Give an example.

(Pages 9-25)

8. Who is Bailey and why do you suppose he has been created for this play?
9. Henry tells Bailey that he is in jail because he has refused to commit murder. What is Henry talking about?
10. Bailey's speeches contain many examples of a nineteenth century New England dialect. Choose a few examples and translate the meaning into standard English.

11. Several important things happen in the interactions between Henry and Bailey. Explain Henry's view of being liked.

12. The other fascinating interchange between Henry and Bailey is the short episode where Henry teaches Bailey to write his name. How does Henry manage to get Bailey to learn the letters in the right order?

13. Besides showing us Henry's gift for teaching, what other function does this scene have?

14. Although Henry does not seem to be a troublemaker, he seems to be in conflict with many people over many different things. What conflicts have you witnessed so far? Why is he often at odds with others? Be alert for continuing and additional conflicts as the play progresses.

15. Why is Henry fired from his job as schoolmaster? Explain the flogging incident.

16. What have the playwrights done in this scene to show the similarities between Waldo and Henry?

17. Most plays use several acts, including various scenes with different stage settings. At this point in the play, we have just witnessed a scene at Henry's school, Waldo's church, and now John is about to do a whole speech about how teaching can take place without a classroom. What scenery is on stage now? When did the stage change? How do the playwrights change sets?

18. John and Henry decide to open their own school. What is their philosophy of education? Where will their school be located?

(Pages 25-40)

19. A new character is introduced on page twenty-five. Name and describe this character.

20. Why does Henry get upset with Ellen during the lesson about grass blades?

21. A major theme is revealed at this point in the play. What words are written in capital letters to emphasize their meaning and shouted at Ellen? What evidence do you have so far that Henry truly believes what he is saying?

22. How has Henry reversed himself about teaching Bailey to read and write?

23. Many of the conversations contain examples of irony. List a few and explain why each is ironic.
24. We mentioned comic relief earlier with respect to Henry's mother and her comments about her son. There are many more examples of comic relief throughout the play. List a few of the ones you find the funniest and briefly explain why.
25. On page thirty-three, Ellen mentions the term Transcendentalism. This is an underlying belief of Thoreau's and Emerson's. Why does Ellen bring it up here?
26. How does Edmund's withdrawal affect Henry's school?
27. How does Henry attempt to explain Transcendentalism?
28. What develops in the relationship between Ellen and Henry?

(Pages 40-55)

29. Henry returns to his jail cell and feels freer than when he had been out in the world. Explain the rationale for his feelings. What does this say about his personality?
30. Briefly recount the scene when John tells Henry about his proposal to Ellen.
31. Something happens to shake Henry's faith in God even further. What is it?
32. After John's death, how does Ellen show her understanding of Transcendentalism?
33. The action moves immediately to the Emersons' home where Henry, Waldo, and Lydian are discussing work. What kind of work is it, and who will be doing it?
34. In his conversation about work, Henry reveals his disdain for money. How? He then asks for a different type of payment. What does he want and why?

35. What do the flute music and the “leafy-green projection” indicate? (Page 53)

36. Find a quotation that explains what Thoreau thinks of planning and saving for retirement.

(Pages 55-63)

37. Reading a play is not as easy as watching one. The scenery and costumes and the inflections, expressions, and gestures of the actors make a play visually stimulating, attracting and keeping the audience’s attention. Reading a play, however, requires the readers to create images in their heads, picturing what is happening to and between the characters. Think back through the beginning scenes of this play; what are some of the images you have visualized and/or can remember vividly?

38. How do the playwrights remind you of the central setting and title of this play?

39. How does the flute music help set the mood for Walden Pond?

40. Why does Henry think the summons he is served suits a practical purpose?

41. Why is Henry angry with Sam?

42. Does Henry want to go to jail? Explain your answer. What is the modern historical allusion in this section?

(Pages 64-67)

43. Lawrence and Lee have included many witty comments, using words carefully chosen for their humorous effect. Sometimes there is a misunderstanding due to the specific use of the word, and sometimes the word itself might carry hidden meanings. When Henry is listing his occupations for Sam Staples, there is a witty use of the word “carpenter.” Explain the deeper meaning of this word.

44. What effect do the writers create by having action occurring on three different areas of the stage at once?

45. The final lines of Act I (Pg. 67) are pretty powerful. Quote them and explain what they mean.

Act II

(Pages 71-79)

1. The theme of freedom comes up again at the beginning of Act II. What is Henry saying about it now?
2. Would you label Henry an optimist or a pessimist? Explain your answer using the huckleberry scene as your example.
3. Henry has a way of looking at things very differently from other people. This goes deeper than just being an optimist in the midst of pessimists. Explain.
4. What unusual question does Edward inform his mother of?
5. In the beginning of the play, Waldo is busy trying to remember Henry's name and refers to him as the boy "who put the gloves on the chickens." (Pg. 3) What is he talking about and when does the reader find this out?
6. The scene between Henry and Lydian continues with much talk of love and loneliness. What implications are there behind both Lydian's and Henry's words?

(Pages 79-92)

7. What is Henry's opinion of lawyers?
8. Who is Williams and when do we meet him?
9. The appearance of Williams allows us to see Henry's reaction to slavery. It is a scene through which we can view another of Henry's deeply held beliefs. Explain.
10. Henry becomes very upset with Waldo in the next scene, continuing an idea that was presented at the end of the first act. What idea is Henry putting forward, and what does he want Waldo to do?
11. Why does Waldo call Henry his "walking ethic"? (Pg. 86)

12. Waldo and Henry get into quite a serious argument. What side does each take and how is this argument resolved?

13. What happens “this afternoon in Concord Square”?

(Pages 92-101)

14. How have the writers changed the traditional marching cadence of “hut-two-three-four”?

15. Suddenly many of the characters take on new roles. What is happening?

16. Why does Henry look relieved in the midst of this chaotic and tense scene?

17. Who is this one person who is brave enough to speak out?

18. Henry’s brother John dies in this scene. Explain how this could happen since he has already died and been buried in a previous scene.

19. Pages 97-99 have some examples of dialect, spoken by Sam. List a few of these examples and translate them.

20. Henry is free to leave the jail once morning comes. Why?

21. What reason does Henry give for leaving “the pond place”? (Pg. 100)

22. A drumbeat begins to sound in the distance, and Henry responds to it. How does the ending of this play dramatize the commonly known phrase of Thoreau’s: “march to the beat of a different drummer”?

23. What very unusual stage direction directs the lighting at the end of this play? Why would the playwrights choose this unusual ending?